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"Recognising plumbers"

delivered at the COAG Plumbers Recognition  
Annual Conference, Fremantle, WA, 28th  
November 2006

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## NPRF Speech Outline

## 1. INTRODUCTION [Slide 1 – Title slide]

- 18 months ago I knew little about licensing and nothing about mutual recognition – the process by which plumbers are recognised when they move across State boundaries.
- For the first 6 of those 18 months, I was the SA Premier Department's representative on a COAG Working Group on skills.
- COAG processes usually focus on difficult problems which impacts upon all States.
- On this occasion, we were looking at how we could achieve a more national and collaborative approach to skills development and use.
- Improvement to mutual recognition was just one of a dozen initiatives COAG had asked us to consider.
- I discovered: **[Slide 2]**
  - Licensing is very complicated
    - Part of this complication is historically based – licence regimes have been developed in isolation in each State
    - Part of it is because, once developed, they have then grown organically, often in response to particular crises eg building subsidence, polluted water, or new developments
  - Ministers from all States and Territories had signed the Mutual Recognition Act 1992 which was supposed to address this problem.
  - Implementation of that Act was quite variable across jurisdictions
  - Lack of certainty and continuing red tape presented ongoing problems for mobility of skilled labour.
- In February 2006, COAG considered all the recommendations of the Working Group and made its recommendations.
- It set a timeframe of 30 June 2007 for achievement of full and effective mutual recognition in six priority occupations – occupations where skill shortages were significant
- All other vocationally trained occupations were to follow by 31 December 2008.
- While the emphasis was on mobility, processes for ensuring quality were to underpin the work carried out.
- Plumbing was one of the priority occupations
- Four Action Groups were to be set up to undertake the work, chaired by representatives from Premiers' Departments.
- Bravely, I put up my hand to chair the Plumbing Occupations Action Group.
- My talk today is about a journey of discovery and how a solution was found to a problem
- Can say the solution will be an enduring one. After this, it will be easier for skilled workers to move between States and Territories. It provides the foundation for future work to streamline the licensing of plumbing or other registered occupations

[illegible]

- COAG decision had established Steering Committee and Secretariat – as well as a challenging timeframe
- Membership of Steering Committee – Premiers' Depts – Chairs of Occupational-based Action Groups
- Role of Steering Committee - Policy direction, consistency, reporting to SOM/COAG
- Role of Commonwealth Secretariat – support, meetings, papers
- First decision of Steering Group – composition of Action Groups

### 3. ESTABLISHING THE ACTION GROUP [Slide 4]

- #### 4. FIRST INFORMATION

- 2

- [illegible]

[illegible]

- [illegible]

[illegible]

- [illegible]

- When agreed, underpinning structures had not been put in place – process left to each State

## 7. PLUMBING BLOCKAGES [Slide 8]

- In POAG - to our surprise – found progress very slow
- No consensus on ‘What is a general plumber?’
- Identified 8 plumbing streams but each State used different number and type. Some used 3, some 4, some 6
- Water plumbing and Sanitary were common to most – beyond that, could not get agreement
- Some States could tailor licences to an amazing degree – made them v. responsive but difficult for other States to provide equivalence.
  - *Example: The Restricted Plumbing Workers’ Registration (in any other way) (this is the name in the Act!) Could be restricted to ‘Cold water plumbing associated with evaporative air conditioning units with a water supply inlet no greater than 15mm nominal diameter connected to a water supply pipe not greater than 20mm nominal diameter’*
- Biggest problem – treatment of single stream licences – treatment in States where only multi-stream licences were issued. Some States unable/unwilling to accept outcome from another State
  - *Example: In Victoria, single stream registration called ‘Provisional Registration – Plumbing (Mechanical Services) Work. Because of scope of work, only one other State is able to issue an equivalent licence*
- Tendency to focus on qualifications
- Inability to locate hard data – know about 372,000 people move interstate each year, there are about 50,000 plumbers (ABS, 2001) and about 21,000 sole trader plumbers
- Number of mutual recognition applications, decisions – difficult to establish
- Often, practice on receipt of application was simply to contact issuing State to find out what licence meant! Data often not kept - decisions varied with assessor.

## 8. SOLUTIONS EMERGE

- Work of Action Groups led to questions in SC – decisions and clarifications
- Each group had agonised over meaning of ‘rationalisation and harmonisation’
- After discussion, Steering Committee decided:
  - Core issue was **mobility** of skilled people
  - Harmonisation was to extent that it achieved effective mutual recognition
  - Rationalisation to be pursued only if Groups saw merit and it supports mobility

- Also, by early June, SC first started to consider harmonisation via **ministerial declarations** – by July, this was confirmed as the likely solution

**[Slide 9]**

- S 32 allows for ministers of 2 or more States to declare that one licence is equivalent to another. Declaration is gazetted and remains until changed or revoked
- Benefits are simplicity, transparency, once declared – no further work for regulators
- Only used once in 14 years! – WA-NSW Coalmine managers
- Recognition this could be done on larger scale
- Process for doing this was gradually developed – agreed in September:
  - Develop a common scope of work descriptor for each stream and specialisation eg, what does a water plumber do – make the scope wide enough to fit all States' requirements
  - Map licences against that scope
  - Equivalency is then transparent – it can be mapped in a matrix of licences from each State
  - Matrix forms basis of ministerial declaration, which also provides scope information and the legislative basis for each licence
- Importance of decisions – solutions do not require legislative or system change but build foundation for this to happen in future, is there is the will
- Put MR decisions on a logical, transparent footing
- With each licence mapped to a common agreed scope, using same language, outcomes faster, simpler, more reliable.

[illegible]

## 9. PROBLEM SOLVED

- By August, POAG had agreed scope of work descriptors for each of the 8 plumbing streams
- Not easy. Took almost entire day, even with Plumbers' Code of Australia as guide. [Slide 10] indicates differences – these are underlined]
- Discussions over inclusion of 'design', addition of 'testing and commissioning' in some scopes, whether work permitted 'above ground' or 'underground'. (Words here depend on slide chosen!)
- Descriptors were developed for sole purpose of developing common language for use in matrices – States don't have to licence every part.
- Regulators asked to map each licence against these scopes
- Secretariat then used responses to develop matrices of equivalences, one for registrations and one for licences
- Original plan was to include all licences in legislation but found this impossible – SA as 'karma sutra' of licensing systems. Too flexible – could not include all permutations. In these cases, we included only main licences
- October – regulators brought together to examine this line by line

- Importance of regulators' meetings in all Action Groups – matters of detail
- Surprising number of changes, given matrix and scopes had been provided several times previously
- There was agreement that where jurisdictions with only multi-stream licences were assessing equivalence against other jurisdictions' single stream licences, equivalence would be declared only where the jurisdiction agreed
- Note:
  - Where licence not included OR State judges it has no equivalent licence – normal MR processes apply
  - Once gazetted – legal requirement on second State to provide the licence(s) stipulated
- Matrices were then taken to the Action Group- early November

## 10. WHERE ARE WE NOW? [Slide 11]

- Ministerial declarations for each priority occupation were distributed for preliminary clearance by each State. Final clearance is now being sought
- Steering Committee meeting of 5 December, SOM on 15 December
- COAG Meeting 12 April
- Gazettal and implementation thereafter

## 11.A LASTING SOLUTION [Slide 12]

- Steering Committee has agreed processes and structures for maintaining the declarations and ensuring a lasting solution
- SC to maintain updates until 1/7/08 - ministers responsible for MR after this.
- Cross Jurisdictional Review Forum will have coordination role
- Declarations will be reviewed on an annual basis
- States will have responsibility to consult when introducing new licensing or making major revisions
- What was achieved should not be underestimated
- Ministerial declarations will cover 80% + of all licences and provide transparent process not there before
- Increased understanding of those involved of processes in other States has been 'priceless'
- This understanding is the basis for further cooperation.
- Together with the structures and protocols put in place for ongoing process, will provide context and impetus for work to improve Australia's licensing in years to come.